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Statement submitted by Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, a non-governmental organization in consultative with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

States in Asia Pacific on average use 7.4 per cent of their GDP for public social protection expenditure, with countries like India spending as little as 1.4 per cent (2015 data). Asia Pacific has a high gender pay gap, with some sub regions such as South Asia seeing the wage gap increase in the last few years. The bulk of care and domestic work, which is usually an invisible and unaccounted contribution to national economies, continues to be shouldered by women. Strong social protection systems can be an effective mechanism for improving gender equality, when they are geared towards reducing these inequalities. States must invest in gender responsive, quality public services, universal social protection systems, and sustainable infrastructure, if they want to meet commitments under CEDAW and Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda.

This submission elaborates on how to bridge the gap in social protection by moving away from the neoliberal economic approach, and how to close gaps in the sources of finance by addressing illicit flows and increasing international cooperation on tax. It also gives examples of participatory and democratic approaches to public service delivery that are essential to realising gender equality.

Challenging the global economic order

The overarching barrier to financing public services - particularly for global south nations and small economies, but also for the world's richest nations - is the neoliberal economic order and the current form of capitalism that persists in the illusion of a trickle down distribution of wealth, and in reality has contributed to the increase in inequality worldwide.

In the past few decades, international finance institutions and global north countries have pressed for deregulation, privatisation, and cuts to public funding, often under the guise of austerity measures. States have sold key assets to the private sector or set up public-private partnerships that result in poor quality public services. In order to correct this, states and financial institutions must accept that capitalism is incompatible with the delivery of universal, gender-responsive, quality services. Delivering clean water and safe sanitation, for example, will never be a profit-making venture, but is recognised by CEDAW as an essential element for women to enjoy the right to adequate living conditions. It cannot be handed over to a corporation that will maximise profit at the cost of health and universal delivery.

Reforming this economic system and approach to development is vitally necessary if states wish to realise the 2030 Agenda. Based on the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and persistent reports on the concentration of the world's wealth to less than one per cent of its population, it is evident that globally we are moving backwards on Goal 10 and 13, which will impact all other goals and create deeper challenges to achieving gender equality. Additionally, increased conflict and rise in climate events has resulted in more refugees and internally displaced persons, a majority of whom are hosted in the global south, who are often excluded from social protection systems.

States need to be bold in rejecting the dominant economic model and take steps such as renationalising assets such as railways, remunicipalising public services such as water and sanitation, and introducing measures for accountability and transparency. States in Asia Pacific should take cognizance of regional civil society's persistent demands for Development Justice, a framework that demands all public policy be guided by the need for gender and social justice, environmental justice, redistributive justice, economic justice and accountability to the people.

Financing gender responsive public services and social protection systems

In a world where corporations make up 69 out of the top 100 economies, the financing of public services and robust social protection systems is a challenge for developing countries. The revenue required can be met by eliminating illicit financial flows, which is estimated to be ten times the size of all development assistance. International cooperation for ending money laundering, bribery, tax evasion, trade mispricing and other financial crimes is necessary as these deprive governments of revenues needed for social protection and public services.

A vital component for addressing tax evasion is transparency. For states to be able to clearly understand large scale tax evasion by transnational corporations, a mandatory requirement for country by country reporting of taxes is necessary in the short term. In the long-term, states can benefit from establishing a global tax body to oversee and guide on this issue.

At the national level, states need to integrate a participatory approach to budgeting so that ministries of finance do not structure national budgets without an understanding of the needs of each department. Government machineries have a siloed approach which needs to be broken to develop cohesive strategies for delivering gender responsive quality public services.

Structuring inclusive, universal, gender-responsive social systems, infrastructure and public services

The delivery of public services that are universal in access and coverage requires integrating a diverse range of approaches. Electrical coverage via a national grid cannot reach a range of geographic areas (deltas, mountains, deserts), and tend to be limited in remote rural areas and small island states. In such areas, systems of energy democracy can be adopted via micro or nano grid renewable energy structures that are community-owned and rely on peer-to-peer sharing of energy. Existing examples of such projects are successful in increasing electrical coverage in remote areas as well as being part of the shift to a zero-carbon future.

States must also take steps to ensure that employment conditions of agencies delivering public services meet the four pillars of decent work. In South Asia, the practice of manual scavenging persists, where sewage and septic tanks are cleaned by workers without safety gear, with estimates of one of these workers dying every five days in India. Workers in these sectors deserve a living wage and safe conditions of work, a consideration that is especially important in countries where cleaning and sanitation work is delegated to minority groups, including on religious and caste basis.

Infrastructure projects, such as highways, bridges, and dams, cannot be initiated without several stages of consultation. Firstly, the real needs of communities need to be assessed: for remote villages lacking access to the nearest clinic or school, the priority is not building a massive bridge that shortens the distance between the capital and the nearest seaport; it should be a viable, affordable mode of public transport. For a community that does not have access to electricity, the solution is not to displace entire villages to set up a mega dam. Prior and informed consent, meaningful impact assessments, and public hearings are integral to building infrastructure that meets the needs of the people, and inclusive of people with disabilities.

Importance of democratic governance and commitment to human rights

All of the measures outlined in this submission become increasingly difficult to deliver as the quality of democracy is challenged globally and authoritarians do their best to consolidate power, often by fomenting conflict. Democratic governance and

recognition of the social contract is essential if states are to succeed in introducing robust, inclusive and gender-responsive social protection systems. The region currently faces several state-sanctioned large-scale acts of violence, including ethnic cleansing, and targeting of indigenous or religious minority communities.

Smaller examples, such as people being arrested for using social media to criticise government livestock subsidies, demonstrate that undemocratic governments who deliberately and actively violate human rights cannot be expected to and will not introduce national social protection floors or universal public services.

Recommendations:

- Commit to the framework of gender-responsive quality public services which are universal in access and coverage, publicly funded, and have measures for transparency and accountability;
- Commit to building inclusive and robust social protection systems that at minimum provide: child and family benefits, maternity protection, unemployment support, employment and injury benefits, sickness benefits, healthcare, old-age benefits, invalidity/disability benefits and survivors' benefits;
- Cooperate to combat illicit financial flows, and follow measures to increase taxation on multinational corporations instead of increasing taxes on low income brackets;
- Reject austerity measures, dismiss the economic growth centred model, and instead increase spending on public goods and use gender-responsive methods in all national budgeting processes.
- Conduct ex-ante, periodic and ex-post human rights, gender and environmental impact assessments of economic policies, including those generated by trade, investment or other financial agreements.